

Local Leaders Look Ahead 25 Years

The philosopher Santayana said those who do not remember their past are condemned to repeat it.

And for some Indian River County residents, that's just fine.

In this year of 75th anniversaries, area leaders were asked to speculate on the next 25 years and changes expected in the area. Many said the past tradition of controlled growth practiced by Vero Beach and the county for many years is the example that should be followed in the impending development challenges.

"This community has learned a lot from the mistakes of others, regarding the community to the south of us not managing their growth," said Stan Mayfield, a School Board member and civil engineer. "We have managed our growth, even to the point where some people didn't like it. (In the next 25 years) I don't think the quality of life will be sacrificed; it may be enhanced."

County Judge Joe Wild said the use of zoning rules and other regulations will keep development at the same slow, controlled rate for the next 25 years.

"I think it will still be a residential-type community as opposed to the surrounding areas," Wild said. "We will be set apart from the Treasure Coast and the Space Coast."

One of the reasons Vero Beach and Indian River County will remain set apart is that the area lacks a transportation hub, according to Millie Bunnell, director of the Heritage Center.

"There's no bus station in town, no airlines come in and the train doesn't stop," she said. "It's kind of great that we're located in a place that's hard to get to. I always believed that people came here for that reason, and I personally think it will remain that way."

On the other hand, a migration of South Floridians from Dade and Broward counties could inundate the county as they flee rampant crime

and other regional problems, according to U.S. Circuit Judge Charles Smith.

Ralph Sexton, a local citrus grower and son of Vero Beach pioneer Waldo Sexton, said he does not foresee a growth rate akin to the development speed of the last 25 years in the next quarter decade, mostly due to the lack of space for unbridled expansion as well as management rules. But he said one particular recent development will ensure a relatively heightened building tempo.

"We're going to have more growth mostly because of the Disney infiltration," Sexton said.

The Disney entertainment conglomerate is building an oceanside vacation resort south of Wabasso Beach Park. The 71-acre development, which will include a 115-room inn and 321 vacation villas as well as recreational facilities, will undoubtedly be a factor in the future of growth of Indian River County.

"It's an attractive area and we're starting to see people more aware of it," said Sebastian City Councilman Frank Oberbeck. "The Disney resort is a good example of this."

Residents clearly have mixed feelings about Disney in their backyards. From the use of the word "infiltration" to the concession that the resort will mean many more people in the area, locals are awaiting the expected economic boon with bittersweet thoughts about its impact.

"In many ways it's positive that people don't know about (Vero Beach)," Bunnell said. "But Disney discovered it, I'm afraid."

County Commissioner Ken Macht said fears of the county turning into a gaudy, commercialized corporate fun land with mouse cars on its water towers are unfounded.

"We used the mechanisms of our comprehensive plan and (Land Development Regulations) to make that impossible," he said. "Disney will be the only use of its kind and the LDRs are such that any similar development or even expansion of that project will be impossible."

The cross-section of area personalities also offered individual insights into the next 25 years

in their respective areas of expertise.

Sexton said any future growth should not be at the expense of the county's bread and butter — the citrus industry.

"I'm a farmer, and I'd frankly like to see no more farm land going into houses and residential areas," Sexton said. "We should keep as many groves as we can for water management, for fresh air and for someplace for the wildlife to go."

The next 25 years in education will be dictated by the success or failure of the Blueprint 2000 state reform program over the next few years, Mayfield said.

"Large bureaucracies resist change, and we have one — that's what public education is," he said. "If we don't change in the current system, then we will get a new system. If this system does not evolve, then it will be changed."

Ralph Landy, a Glifford community activist who runs Our Father's Table soup kitchen, said cycles of government corruption, crime, broken homes and problems in schools unfortunately will probably continue in the next 25 years.

"It's escalating," he said. "Hunger and food are big issues right now. More and more people are homeless and without food. I think it's going to climb, I don't know what the end will be, but somehow we will have to face it. I do know we have to do something. People are desperate and are going to do anything to survive."

The business climate of Indian River County will likely transform as well. Piper Aircraft President Charles Suma said the area must shake its reliance on service-industry jobs.

"I look forward to an increase in the industrial base to balance out economic activity in the county," Suma said. "What I'm advocating is a balance between the service area and light manufacturing that will make the county rely less on one industry, which makes for a very weak local economy."

"This county has relied on citrus and fish for so long," agreed Oberbeck.

The county judicial system will see changes

designed to alleviate the demands a booming population places on the courts. Wild said there will be expanded use of mediation, arbitration and other non-trial means in criminal court. Smith said even more radical changes likely will occur on the civil side, including implementing technological advances.

"You will see more telephone and even video conferences," Smith said. "We may even have some trials on television, where a condensed, taped trial is shown to a judge or jury. All the objections are ruled on beforehand, and when you take out all the interruptions and conferences, it saves juries a lot of time."

Local governments also will be faced with the challenges of growing pains. Oberbeck said the city of Sebastian will attract new development at an unprecedented rate due to new businesses in the area and the opening of Sebastian River High School.

"The infrastructure will have to be rebuilt," he said. "Furnishing the water, sewer and road work will be the greatest challenge to the city in next 20-25 years."

Vero Beach Mayor Caroline Ginn said keeping the city's low-rise, low density building regulations will be a priority in the future since development challenges are certain. She added that municipal services must be kept affordable.

"Unless there is greater efficiency in government and water and sewer rates are lower, this would be a very expensive place to live. We have to get those under control."

The county will have to deal with growing "desperate" struggles with state and federal governments over funding programs the higher-tier authorities mandate but do not fund, Macht said.

"If things go unchanged, we're going to have some real money problems," he said. "Absent some real federal and state tax policy reform, I'm a little bit pessimistic on that."

— By MATT GRIMISON



Bunnell



Suma



Macht



Sexton



Oberbeck